DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 105 987 PS 007 840

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TITLE Sesame Street: Socialization by Surrogate.
PUB DATE 30 Dec 74
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (Chicago, Illinois, December 30, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Affective Behavior; Childhood Attitudes; *Educational Television; Objectives; Peer Relationship; *Preschool Education; *Program Evaluation; *Socialization; Television Curriculum; Television Research; Values
IDENTIFIERS Cooperative Behavior; *Sesame Street

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews some of the controversy surrounding "Sesame Street's" treatment of the socialization progress of preschool television viewers. Examined in detail are those portions of "Sesame Street" programs which contribute to children's learning of socially acceptable attitudes and behaviors. Some comparisons are made between "Sesame Street" programs aired during the initial 1969-70 season and a sampling of the more recent program segments. Research proposed by the Children's Television Workshop and the Harvard Center for Research should provide additional information concerning "Sesame Street's ability to positively affect the behavior of young children. (CS)

ED105987

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SESAME STREET: SOCIALIZATION BY SURROGATE[1]

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For many people the very phrase--the social influence of television--has a negative connotation. We are all familiar with those bleak statistics that mournfully tally the number of hours our children spend before the television screen. We know that for many children the television set is a playmate, teacher, companion, and window to the workings of the world beyond the home. There is now available a sizable body of research which emphasizes the harmful effects of television viewing and, particularly, of certain types of TV programs on children of all ages. Only a few studies have emphasized the positive influences that carefully constructed television programs can exert on youthful audiences.

Sesame Street is the very epitome of a carefully constructed program series designed to educate and influence its pre-school audience. Sesame Street's success in the teaching of cognitive skills--the recognition of letters, numbers, and geometric shapes--has been extensively researched and widely reported. Much less has been said about Sesame Street's work in the affective domain, that portion of the educational experience which deals with attitudinal development and behavior acquisition.

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[1]Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Chicago, December 30. 1974.

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The Sesame Street characters--be they in human, cartoon, or muppet form--are very real people to the millions of children who view the program. As these performers relate to their Sesame Street society and to each other, they provide modeling effects which can teach a variety of socially desirable behaviors. Kindness to others, respect for racial differences, empathy, conflict resolution, justice and fair play--these and other concepts are part of the covert curriculum which alters and hastens the socialization process of American pre-schoolers.

The balance of this paper will examine in greater detail those portions of the Sesame Street programs which contribute to this socialization. The author will make some critical judgments and some comparisons between Sesame Street programs aired during the initial 1969-70 season and those of more recent vintage.

The First Two Years: Attributes and Criticisms

Two items that caught the attention of adult viewers during Sesame Street's premiere season were the urban setting of the program and the racial make-up of the cast. Clearly this program was designed to appeal to its target audience of disadvantaged and inner city pre-schoolers and yet the setting and characters were not so obtrusive as to discourage the middle class child from becoming a member of the audience. The selection of Matt Robinson, a black producer and writer, to play Gordon, the strong male character of the program, was an important element of the casting. Robinson, in the opinion of Gerald Lesser, chairman of the Children's Television Workshop Advisory Board, conveyed the combination of casualness and authority which the producers sought in the male lead.[3] Susan, the

[3]Gerald S. Lesser, Children and Television: Lessons from Sesame Street. (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 38.

female lead portrayed by Loretta Long, was Gordon's wife though female activists, annoyed by the limitations of her housewife role, insisted that she be given a part-time job in later episodes. Bob McGrath and Will Lee as Bob and Mr. Hooper were white neighbors who proved by example that whites and blacks could live harmoniously in the same neighborhood.

It was this implied assertion which brought Sesame Street its first real criticism. In a highly publicized action, the Mississippi State Commission for Educational Television accused Sesame Street of endorsing racial integration because it uses a highly integrated cast of adults and children. (No one from CTW has ever denied the assertion.) The Commission refused to clear the program for broadcast over public television stations in the state but was forced to relent when several Mississippi commercial stations indicated they would carry the program if the public stations refused to air it. There was similar though short-lived opposition to Sesame Street in northern Louisiana.

Instructional goals for the first year of Sesame Street were organized under four general categories: symbolic representation, cognitive processes, the physical environment, and the social environment.[4] Those elements of program content which we might label affective or attitudinal were generally under the latter category and, more specifically, under the following subcategories: (a) differences in perspectives, (b) cooperation, and (c) rules which insure justice and fair play. The summative evaluation of Sesame Street's first year[5], performed by the Educational Testing Service at a cost of $250,000, dealt primarily with pre- and post-viewing scores by

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[4]Instructional Goals of the Children's Television Workshop, Mimeo, 1969.

[5]Samuel Ball and Gerry Ann Bogatz, The First Year of Sesame Street: An Evaluation. (Princeton: Education Testing Service, 1970).

943 subjects on such easy-to-quantify concepts as recognizing letters in words and naming numbers. No measure of attitude or attitude change was attempted by the research team. A second Educational Testing Service evaluation for the 1970-71 broadcast year[6] was almost as limited in scope but did contain some attitudinal information. This report indicated that Sesame Street viewers had more positive attitudes to school, to their peers, and to members of a different race than did non-viewers.[7] This first bit of attitudinal information--the more positive attitude toward school--seemed to refute the fears expressed by some observers that Sesame Street viewers accustomed to a fast-paced entertaining television format, would be "turned off" by conventional class instruction.[8]

During the first two seasons, Sesame Street earned far more praise than criticism but the latter was not entirely lacking. One set of critics chided Sesame Street for sugar-coating reality.[9] Another group complained that Sesame Street's methods included "Brainwashing," "conditioning," "mind control," and "producing programmed people," all presumably linked to "behavioristic theories" that force or trick children into learning prescribed content in a predetermined way.[10]

Reading specialist Jeanette Veatch charged that Sesame Street sold abstract knowledge "just as TV commercials sell toothpaste."[11] Educational critic John Holt charged that Sesame Street was too much like school where

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[6]Gerry Ann Bogatz and Samuel Ball, The Second Year of Sesame Street: A Continuing Evaluation. (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1971).

[7]Ibid., p. 175.

[8]Ibid., p. 136.

[9]Lesser, p. 194.

right answers come from grown-ups and children respond without much animation or imagination to leading questions put by adults. We rarely see children figuring things out, says Holt; in fact, we rarely see children doing anything.[12]

Sesame Street's most publicized put-down came from the British Broadcasting Corporation which rejected the series as unsuitable for its own youthful viewers. In a series of speeches and articles, Monica Sims, director of children's programs for the BBC, denounced Sesame Street for its "hard-selling techniques," American slang, emphasis on right answers, encouragement of "passive box watching," goal of "preparing children for school but not for life," and various other ommissions and commissions which the BBC found unsatisfactory.[13] The Independent Television Authority, that commission which licenses Britain's commercial television stations, did choose to air some Sesame Street segments after the BBC had rejected the series but the ITA broadcasts were limited to one per week and utilized by only four of the independent stations.[14]

We note that most of the criticisms directed at Sesame Street were affective rather than cognitive in their orientation. Critics seemed far more concerned with the role Sesame Street plays in the socialization process than in the program's ability to teach counting or reading readiness skills.

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[10] Ibid., p. 190

[11] Jeanette Veatch, "Sesame Street: Program Review," Educational Broadcasting Review, April, 1970, p. 57.

[12] John Holt, "Big Bird, Meet Dick and Jane," Atlantic Monthly, May, 1971, pp. 72-78.

[13] Lesser, p. 180.

[14] Independent Television Authority, Reactions to Sesame Street in Britain, 1971. (London: ITA, 1972).

Televison as a Positive Socialization Medium: Some Recent Research

During the 1971-72 broadcast season, the third year of Sesame Street programming, the Children's Television Workshop sought to refine its definitions of social behavior and to evaluate the impact of programming directed to certain specific goals. The Workshop chose to emphasize cooperation because it fit the criterion of a "universal goal." Cooperation, as defined by the Sesame Street producers, referred to situations that actively involve two or more individuals in interaction. The Workshop commissioned Teaching Research Corporation, an Oregon firm, to test the effectiveness of those portions of the Sesame Street telecasts specifically designed to teach cooperative behavior. This project, only recently reported, is the first Sesame Street research specifically directed to the socialization process.[15]

The study tested the following hypothesis: Three- and four-year-old, disadvantaged, inner city children who watch Sesame Street for an hour a day in their day school are more likely to cooperate than similar children who do not watch the program.[16] Seventy-eight children participated in the study with 36 being assigned to a View group and the remaining 42 to a Non-View group. Data from the study supported the hypothesis. Those children in the View group learned to cooperate more than did children in the Non-View group. This result was obtained whether the cooperative

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[15]F. Leon Paulson, "Teaching Cooperation on Television: An Evaluation of Sesame Street Social Goals Programs," Audio-Visual Communication Review, Fall, 1974, pp. 229-246.

[16]Ibid., pp. 231-232.

response taught on the show was scored, or whether other cooperative responses relating to the task were scored. Children in the View and Non-View groups did not demonstrate a significant difference in their cooperation activities during free play, however. This demonstrated a weakness in the social goals program, an inability to generalize the teaching of cooperation to settings other than those specifically displayed in the Sesame Street segments. The research report minimized this failure to generalize, however, by insisting that the specific cooperation segments were not designed with generalization or transfer of learning in mind.[17] In effect, the Sesame Street segments were designed to teach very specific types of cooperation and, in these specific tasks, they were successful.

Another study directly related to the positive aspects of socialization in children's programming, but not to Sesame Street, is the CBS research dealing with children who viewed episodes of Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids.[18] In this study 711 children who were familiar with the Fat Albert series saw one new (previously un-aired) episode of Fat Albert and was later interviewed. Those portions of the questionnaire bearing on the program's message were open-ended and no message was suggested to any child by either the questionnaire or the interviewer.

Overall, almost nine out of ten children (89.3 percent) received one or more specific pro-social messages from the episode of Fat Albert which he viewed. Older children (9-11) were significantly more likely to receive one of more pro-social messages than were younger children (7-8). White

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[17] Ibid., p. 243.

[18] Office of Social Research, CBS Broadcast Group, A Study of Messages Received by Children Who Viewed An Episode of Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids. (New York: CBS, 1974).

children of middle and lower class background were more likely to receive such messages than were black children of lower class background. This is a very brief summary of a lengthy report. Time prevents a review of all eleven findings but the complete report is available from CBS on request.

Last April the Children's Television Workshop and the Harvard Center for Research in Children's Television submitted a proposal to the National Institute of Education for funds to undertake a two year study.[19] This study will focus entirely on the utilization of television for the social and affective development of pre-school children. CTW has already identified two specific areas where they believe televsion can teach pro-social behavior: (a) coping with failure, and (b) entering social groups. That research has not yet been funded, primarily because of the financial crunch at NIE, but CTW has been asked to re-submit the proposal. When this research is completed, we will have much more information concerning the ability of Sesame Street to positively affect the behavior of young children.

Sesame Street in 1974: Some Observations

During the past month, I've spent some time re-acquainting myself with Sesame Street. This year's programs are very different from the ones I recall viewing during Sesame Street's two initial seasons. Gordon, Susan, Bob, and Mr. Hooper have all had their roles cut rather drastically and they seldom appear together. Three new personalities, Luis, Maria, and Linda have been

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[19]Children's Television Workshop, "Television for the Social and Attitudinal Development of Young Children: A Proposal to the National Institute of Education," April 20, 1974, Mimeo.

added to the entourage. The first two are Latino teen-agers while Linda is a deaf mute who communicates in sign language.

The Spanish language and certain elements of Spanish culture have been added to the Sesame Street curriculum. These program elements have been included to reinforce cultural identity and self pride in viewers from Spanish-speaking backgrounds while, at the same time, familiarizing the non-Spanish-speaking child with another language and another set of customs.

The statement of instructional goals for the current season has been expanded considerably when compared to statements from previous years.[20] This year's goals include a lengthy section on emotions and another on social interactions in addition to the bilingual/bicultural aspects previously mentioned.

Bert and Ernie, Big Bird, and Oscar the Grouch seem to have expanded their roles at the expense of the human performers. Various muppets were used in over half the sequences of every program I observed. Film animation has been decreased and live-action film has been cut drastically. These latter two changes have been dictated by budgetary restrictions in current CTW funding. I am concerned about the decline in time alloted to human performers though I recognize the inherent popularity of Jim Henson's muppet creations. My nine-year-old daughter, who five years earlier was a member of Sesame Street's first audience, has attempted to convince me that its more fun to learn from muppets and that people aren't that important. I'm not

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[20]Instructional Goals for the Sixth Experimental Season of Sesame Street (1974-75), Mimeo, 1974.

completely persuaded however, and question the "de-humanization" that seems to have occurred.

The rapid sequencing of program segments--between 35 and 43 different segments in the programs I viewed--seemed more pronounced this year than when I last viewed the series. Sesame Street is still catering to, and perhaps perpetuating, the very short attention spans which psychologists attribute to pre-school children. Some of the segments invite the viewer to participate but most do not.

Positive social attributes are still very much encouraged on Sesame Street. During my viewing I noted segments which emphasized truthfulness and cooperation. (Watch the witches cooperate and give us something really great!) Other segments were designed to give youthful viewers a better understanding of emotions including anger, fear, frustration, and love. The importance of recognizing each person as a separate and worthy individual was repeatedly stressed.

It is true that we have little hard-core evidence to measure the exact degree or manner in which Sesame Street acts as a positive influence on its youthful audience. That evidence is beginning to accumulate, however, and we will probably see more of it in the near future.